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Representative Lee Randall, Chairman
House Agriculture Committee
Helena, Montana 59620

Dear Representative Randall,

Thank you for reading this. I am working with Representative Edmunds to offer HB 574 to change laws related to the sale of milk. When I wanted to obtain raw milk for its health benefits, I discovered that it was illegal in Montana. Many of my friends also wanted access to raw milk, so I began a journey to see what I could do to change the existing statute. In my research, I learned quite a bit about milk and the dairy industry.

Over half of the states in the nation allow raw milk sales, either in the grocery stores or direct from farmers. All we want is for Montana to allow raw milk sales directly from farmers. This bill would meet the growing demand for raw milk, which consumers are seeking out because of its health properties. The bill provides many additional benefits:

1. Provides important economic opportunities for small farmers who can charge a fair price in direct-to-consumer transactions. Dairy farmers are struggling due to high feed and energy prices and, as a result, more and more family-scale dairies are selling out to large dairies. This bill allows farmers who are willing to manage a limited number of cows, goats or sheep to have a marketable product to sell to interested customers. The bill also provides opportunities for 4-H and FFA youth in dairying.
2. Benefits our state economy because consumers' money will stay within the state instead of going to the large out-of-state dairy conglomerations.
3. Allows Montanans to choose to buy from people in the local community whom we know, as opposed to buying from large-scale, out-of-state food sources.
4. Reduces government intrusion into people's lives. We should be able to decide what we want to put into our bodies or not. The government doesn't need to protect us from ourselves. The Section 1 herd shares provision simply recognizes what should already be clear, that people have the right to jointly own an animal and enjoy the products from their property.
5. Ensures transparency and accountability. Since the bill only allows small-scale, direct-to-consumer transactions, the consumer will always know the source of the milk and be able to hold them accountable. A local farmer who produces a sub-standard product will not only lose customers and financial support, but will have to face those people in his community. In contrast, if something goes wrong at a large-scale out-of-state conglomerate, the effects are far-reaching with few real consequences for the seller.
6. Maintains health and safety standards. The bill sets out specific standards for raw milk for sale, including random quarterly testing. The bill only allows sales from small farms (a maximum of 15 cows or 30 sheep or goats), so the quantity of milk sold per quarter is very small, often less than what large dairies sell in a single week.

Opposition: Many in the dairy industry, as well as many in the government and health industries, have been preconditioned over years with incorrect information concerning the safety of milk. Ask McKenzie for the statistics sheet showing data from the CDC's own website and other scientifically-recognized sources showing that raw milk is no more dangerous than many other foods like spinach, cantaloupe, peanut butter, burger, fruit salad, pizza and tuna.

While some people claim that there have been lawsuits and increased incidents of illness where raw milk has been legalized, the data does not support that claim. As per the statistics sheet, there is no consistent pattern of increased illnesses corresponding to legal sales of raw milk. As you may notice, even in states where raw milk is illegal, many people still drink it. Here in Montana, when I spoke with various dairies, I found that the dairy farmers and their families drink their own raw milk, even though that milk does not meet the standards we are setting in this bill.

Any food can make you sick. We are not denying that raw milk can cause illness if handled improperly, just like any other food. There have been sporadic, occasional and inconsistent reports of raw milk illness, but these have not been enough to establish the necessary pattern to indicate an actual problem.

Another argument from the opposition is that, should there be an "outbreak," this will hurt the dairy industry because people will stop drinking all milk. This simply isn't true. This bill does not allow for raw milk to be sold in stores. Should anyone ever become sick, and the illness legitimately linked to the raw milk, there would be a very small number of people affected and the source would be very clear. Since the sale would not have occurred at a grocery store, there would be no reason for people to confuse the issue.

Also in the statistics sheet is recent data regarding the safety and health benefits of raw milk. Most likely, many born-and-bred Montanans grew up drinking raw milk, like my husband. Scientific studies from Europe have shown that raw milk's benefits are real, and all we're asking is that people be able to weigh the risks and benefits for themselves.

In addition to legalizing the sale of raw milk from small-scale dairies, the bill includes a section recognizing people's property right to drink milk from their own animals. Across the country, people who are unable to keep their own dairy animals are joining together to buy a cow, goat or sheep, and pay a farmer to board the animal, take care of it, and provide them with the milk from their animal. Though there is no law prohibiting herd shares, people have received cease and desist letters from The Department of Livestock and have been harassed by state agencies. As a result, the herd shares operating in Montana do so "under the radar."

One of several such farmers in Montana has been practicing a herd share operation for almost a decade, with 47 shareholders. There have been no illnesses or complaints in that entire time. The farmer strives for high quality products because they have relationships with the shareholders, and feel a tremendous amount of responsibility to provide a healthful, quality product. Yet these farmers were afraid to testify here today because it exposes them to harassment by the DOL and the Health Department. This does not help the farmer, the herd share owners, or our state.

This bill asks only that Montana join the majority of the nation in recognizing its citizens' property rights and their right to choose what food they buy and consume. The section that would legalize the sale of raw milk includes several safety measures, from keeping the herd limited to requiring sanitation and testing measures. The opposition to the bill raises many fears, but few facts. I urge you to look beyond such baseless fears and support the interests of Montana consumers and farmers.

Please support HB574. /s/ Chris Rosenau